

Message Text

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CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L CANBERRA 6639

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR PGOV PINT AS
SUBJECT: FRASER AND THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

REF: CANBERRA 6593

1. SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER FRASER HAS ADMITTED THAT HE ASKED ROBINSON TO WRITE HIM A NOTE ABOUT HIS (ROBINSON'S) TESTIMONY TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION (REFTEL) THUS TEMPORARILY DAMPENING THE UPROAR OVER THE PRIME MINISTER'S ALLEGED INVOLVEMENT IN THE EVENTS WHICH LED TO FIRING SENATOR WITHERS FOR "IMPROPRIETIES" WITH REGARD TO ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES IN QUEENSLAND. THE PUBLIC DEBATE OVER THE PRIME MINISTER'S ROLE IN THE AFFAIR CONTINUES, HOWEVER, BECAUSE IT IS NOW CLEAR THAT FRASER WAS AWARE OF WITHERS' INTERVENTION WITH THE QUEENSLAND ELECTORAL
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COMMISSION WHEN THE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY WERE FRAMED. END SUMMARY.

2. SEEKING TO DEFUSE THE PUBLIC UPROAR OVER SENATOR WITHERS' DISMISSAL FOR "IMPROPRIETIES" (ATTEMPTING TO INFLUENCE ELECTORAL COMMISSION REDISTRICTING OF QUEENSLAND'S ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES), PRIME MINISTER

FRASER LAST NIGHT ADMITTED HAVING ASKED FINANCE MINISTER ERIC ROBINSON TO COMMIT TO PAPER ROBINSON'S RECOLLECTION OF A DISCUSSION ON JANUARY 17TH IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE IN WHICH IT HAS BEEN ALLEGED THAT THE PRIME MINISTER FIRST BECAME AWARE OF WITHERS' INTERVENTION WITH THE QUEENSLAND ELECTORAL COMMISSION. ROBINSON HAS ADMITTED HAVING DRAFTED THE NOTE IN QUESTION, BUT HAS ADDED THAT AFTER TAKING LEGAL ADVICE AND CONCLUDING THAT IT WOULD ADD NOTHING TO HIS SWORN TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY, DECIDED NOT TO SEND

THE NOTE AND DESTROYED THE ORIGINAL. THE TEXT OF ROBINSON'S NOTE (FROM A COPY WHICH WAS APPARENTLY KEPT IN FRASER'S OFFICE) ADDS, IN FACT, NOTHING TO WHAT IS NOT ALREADY KNOWN, AND DOES NOT CONTAIN ANY INCRIMINATING CHARGES AGAINST THE PRIME MINISTER.

3. WHAT HAS NOW SURFACED INSTEAD AS THE MAIN ISSUE IS THE FACT THAT THE PRIME MINISTER WAS APPARENTLY CLEARLY AWARE ON APRIL 24TH (AT THE TIME THAT HE HELPED FRAME THE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE ROYAL COMMISSION) THAT SENATOR WITHERS HAD MADE AN APPROACH TO THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION. THE OPPOSITION HIT RELENTLESSLY TODAY, DURING QUESTION TIME IN PARLIAMENT, AT THE QUESTION "IF THE PRIME MINISTER KNEW OF SENATOR WITHERS' ACTION IN CONFIDENTIAL

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APPROACHING THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION, WHY WAS THIS NOT INCLUDED IN THE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE ROYAL COMMISSION?" (AFTER WITHERS' ROLE BECAME PUBLICLY KNOWN, THE TERMS OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION WERE BROADENED TO INCLUDE THIS ASPECT; BY THE TIME THE ROYAL COMMISSION FINISHED ITS INQUIRY, ROBINSON -- THE ORIGINAL TARGET OF THE INQUIRY -- HAD BEEN EXONERATED, AND WITHERS -- WHO HAD NOT BEEN PREVIOUSLY NAMED, -- WAS SACKED.)

4. THUS, FRASER HAS DEFUSED ONE ISSUE (WHETHER OR NOT HE TRIED TO PRESSURE ROBINSON TO QUALIFY THE LATTERS'S TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ROYAL COMMISSION IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE PRIME MINISTER) AT THE COST OF OPENING WHAT WILL PROBABLY BE A MUCH MORE EMBARRASSING AND LONG-LIVED ONE: HIS CLEAR FOREKNOWLEDGE OF WITHERS' ROLE IN THE MATTER AT THE TIME HE (FRASER) ESTABLISHED THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ROBINSON'S PART IN THE ELECTORAL BOUNDARY ISSUE. HOW THE PRIME MINISTER WILL GET OUT OF THIS ONE IS ANYONE'S GUESS. IT IS WORTH REPEATING, HOWEVER, THAT THE OPPOSITION LACKS THE POWER TO DEPOSE HIM; HE WILL ONLY BE REMOVED IF HIS OWN PARTY TURNS AGAINST HIM, AND THE TENTATIVE JUDGEMENT AMONG CANBERRA OBSERVERS

IS THAT THIS IS NOT YET IMMINENT, ALTHOUGH IT MAY HAVE
MOVED A STEP CLOSER IN THE LONG RUN AS A RESULT OF THE
DEVELOPMENTS LAST NIGHT.
ALSTON

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